

The Florist and the Chief by moon_fox4

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Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Billy Hargrove, Eleven (Stranger Things), Florence "Flo" (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Original Female Character(s), Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Jim "Chief" Hopper/Original Female Character(s)

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Summary:

Hopper and his girlfriend, Mac get in an argument about what happened to her one winter night.

*** UPDATE 12/15/17: I have posted a second chapter/part to this story! Hope y'all like it. Feel free to leave a comment! ^_^ ***

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I took some liberties with this fic, so bare with me. (I am aware that the band Greta Van Fleet is not actually a Led Zeppelin cover band, but for the purposes of this story, they are)

Rap rap...rap...rap rap rap.

A young woman stood in the kitchen of a small cabin in the woods. She was facing the counter, her hands pressed into the cracked linoleum. She was of average height and build with long auburn hair that at the time was secured in a messy plait down her back. Her glasses were propped atop her head; the left lens had a spiderweb pattern radiating from the bottom corner. When she heard the knock on the door, it startled her but she didn't move to answer it. She could hear the rustle of the person on the other side leaning to press their head against the wood.

“Mac...I know you’re in there. Open the door.” a rumbling male voice growled.

The young woman sighed, “El!” she called out.

All four locks on the door slid open without anyone touching them. Moments later a tall, hulking man in a khaki uniform let himself in. Hawkins Police Chief, Jim Hopper shut the door behind him and relocked it. He reached to grab his ranger hat off his head and tossed it onto the empty kitchen table next to the door. Across the living room, the first bedroom door creaked as it swung shut, latching with a soft click. Mac had yet to move from the counter.

“Hey, I know I’m late.” Hopper mumbled apologetically. “Why didn’t you come to the door?”

Mac shook her head, “I’m tired, Hop. I just want to go home.” she sighed

“Why don’t you just stay here? It’s late and the roads are getting icy.”

Mac finally turned around, “I really just want to be in my own bed tonight.”

Hopper’s face immediately dropped as he took in the young woman’s face, “What the hell happened to you?”

“Nothing, I need to go home. Alright, Jim? I just need to go home.”

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“Hey, hun. How’s your day going?” Hopper said as he leaned back in his chair.

It was almost four o’clock and Hopper had only just gotten a chance to sit down. He pulled out his pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket, went to light one, then remembered who he had on the phone and put it back. Instead he reached into the top drawer of his desk and grabbed the pack of cinnamon gum he kept there. He popped a piece into his mouth and started to chew, feeling less than satisfied but knowing it would make the young woman on the phone happy.

“Good, I had a couple orders to do today. An anniversary and some office birthdays. And poor old Ms. Grayson’s daughter, Linda came in about doing the arrangements for Mr. Grayson’s funeral. She wants daffodils and I felt so awful trying to explain to her that they’re not in season.” Mackenna Kinney replied on the other end of the line.

Hopper frowned, “Right, I forgot about that.”

“Well...no matter. I’m just happy for the work. I could use the distraction today.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Oh you know. Bad hair day, spilt my coffee on myself on the drive in and had to turn around for new pants. Dropped a bushel of yellow roses when I finally made it to the shop and probably bruised all of them. You know me, a mess as usual.”

“You’re not a mess, Mac. You’re wonderful.”

Hopper could almost hear her grinning across the connection, “Aw shucks, Jim. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you wanted something.”

“You know me too well, Mackenna.”

“So, fess up. What do you need?”

“Today has been nuts. I only just got a chance to sit down and call you.” Hopper confessed.

“Chief, what do you need?” Mac repeated.

Hopper pressed his lips together. He didn’t like to admit it, but he loved when she called him Chief, “I told El she could go over to the Byers’ house after school. I’m supposed to pick her up at six, but I don’t know if I can do that anymore. I was hoping you could go for me.”

“Oh, of course! That’s not a problem at all.”

“Good. I really do appreciate it.”

Mac chuckled, “It’s fine, Jim. Six o’clock you said?”

“Yeah...yeah. Six o’clock.” Hopper said distractedly as his secretary Flo poked her head around his office door. “You’re the best, hun. You’re a lifesaver.”

“You know it!”

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Hopper stepped closer to get a better look at Mac’s face. “Clearly something happened. Didn’t you tell me you dropped some roses earlier? Did you trip or something?”

“No, I didn’t trip.” she answered shortly. The skin around her left eye was already tinted black and blue and matching bruises were forming in splotches around her throat.

Hopper reached to cup her cheek but she flinched away, “How did this happen? Who did this to you?”

“It doesn’t matter, Hop! I just want to go home.” she said, trying to step around him.

“No, who did this to you?” Hopper growled and blocked her path to the door.

Standing at his full height, he towered over Mac though she wasn’t very short. She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture, “Some dumbass kid when I went to pick up El. I was hoping you’d get home before the bruising set in so I could just take off without you noticing.”

“What kid? And why the hell wouldn’t you want me to find out?” he snapped.

Mac rolled her eyes and held out her hand to his chest which was puffed out in anger and his fists that were balled up at his sides, “For this express reason, Hopper!”

“Come on, Mac. That’s not fair. You’re smarter than that. Tell me what happened.”

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Mac was smarter than that. Her day job for the last seven years might’ve been a humble florist, and gosh darn it was she a good one. But she had always aspired to be a biology teacher. She had done her undergraduate degree in botany and had planned to continue on to get a masters and a teaching certification, maybe even a PhD someday. Though not everything works out how it’s planned.

She was raised by her grandparents after her own parents passed away in a tragic car accident when she was a child. Her grandfather owned and ran the little florist in town and Mac had spent many an afternoon in the shop with him. It was what spurred her to study plants in the first place. Her grandparents had always supported her endeavours and encouraged her to expand her mind in whatever ways she could.

Mac had taken a gap year after her bachelors degree to help out in the shop before starting into her masters program. Her grandmother had passed away a few years before and her grandfather was getting a little long in the tooth to be running a shop on his own. But as the old man started getting sicker and sicker, it fell on Mac to keep the family business alive.

She never resented her grandfather for expecting her to take over the florist shop. Not even after he passed away a few years after she graduated, leaving the deed in her name. Being a florist at the very least had something to do with her degree. What she missed some days -- when the money was tight or there were frustrating customers -- were her dreams of teaching. Mac had always wanted to expand young minds. She even ran a small biology tutoring group at the local library.

It was at the local library where she met Hopper for the first time. Mac was an avid reader, so it wasn't unusual to find her scouring the shelves not only for books to help her students. She also enjoyed reading for pleasure. She liked to boast that her record was four books in one day. Her grandmother had loved to read her stories when she was young. So she supposed she got the botany from her grandfather and the bookishness from her grandmother.

One sunny Friday afternoon in mid-August she was looking for a new stack to keep her occupied over the weekend. She had five books in her arms already, which was the library's limit, but was still scanning the shelves as she passed in case she spotted something she'd want to read more. Of course, because of this she wasn't paying attention when she reached the end of the shelf and nearly barreled into Hopper.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Chief. I didn't see you there!" she cried apologetically.

Hopper took one look at her and smiled, an expression everyone knew he didn't wear very often, "It's no trouble Miss...Kinney, right?"

Mac blushed, "Yes, but Mackenna will do just fine."

"Alright, Mackenna. Well it's nice to meet you." he said, holding out

a hand for her to shake.

She juggled her books to take it, his hand almost completely engulfing her own. In the dust speckled light filtering in through the window, she could just see the few grey hairs growing in his beard. She remembered seeing pictures of him in the trophy cases at the high school. He had been on the football team and she guessed that he was probably about six years her senior. But there was something about the way he looked at her...she didn't mind an older man.

"The boys responded to a call from you recently, I remember. A break in?" he continued.

"Yes, sir. Officers Callahan and Powell came by to check it out for me." she replied.

"Oh, I see. Were they able to resolve it for you?"

Mac nodded, "Yes, it seemed like some drunk kids broke in expecting to find something good. There were some empty bottles in the alley behind the shop by the broken door. But I store the register tray in the safe every night, just in case, you know? So nothing was taken. Just some crushed flowers."

"That's very smart of you. I'm sorry it had to come to that, though."

"It's alright. If I'm being honest, I probably crush more flowers in a week just from my own damn clumsiness than what got ruined in that one night."

Hopper chuckled, "I'm sure it can't be that many."

"Believe me, Chief, it really is." Mac said honestly and Hopper raised a brow.

"You can call me Hopper, you know. You don't have to call me Chief or sir all the time."

Mac blushed, dipping her head to look up through her eyelashes shyly, "Oh, sure...Hopper."

"Well I'll let you get to your reading. Looks like you have a lot to get

through.”

“Hardly. This’ll last me a day or two probably.”

“A day or two? You must be a real fast reader.”

“Yessi-” Mac stopped herself from calling him sir again. “Yes, a fast reader.”

Hopper was grinning madly, a rogue twinkle in his eye, “I never really got into reading myself. But my girl...she wants me to read with her and I never know what to pick out.”

“I could suggest a few books! What kinds of things does your daughter like?”

“Oh, she’s not my daughter.”

“Oh, sorry. I misheard you.” Mac said quickly.

“No, no. Sorry...you were right. She’s just not my biological daughter. It’s uh...kind of a long story.” Hopper explained nervously.

“Okay...well, regardless. Do you have a few minutes? I could help you pick some out right now, if you like.”

Hopper checked his watch, then smiled at her, “I guess I could squeeze in a quick search. Thanks.”

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“You don’t need to know. Because you’ll just rush off to find him and cause a scene. Just let it go, Jim.” Mac grumbled.

Hopper growled deep in his chest, “It was that fucking Hargrove kid, wasn’t it? I swear to God, I’m gonna lay that little shit out one of these days...”

“Hopper, shut up.”

Mac passed by Hopper and headed for the door. She got a few steps before Hopper turned and grabbed her arm. “Take your fucking

hands off me, Hopper.” she hissed at him, glancing at the shut bedroom door to her left.

Hopper didn’t let go, “No, why won’t you just tell me what happened?”

“Why? Maybe because I don’t owe you anything. Maybe because I’m not your wife! I’m not El’s mother! Maybe because you let me in on all this shit and the next thing I know I’m getting throttled by a fucking *teenager*!” Mac shouted, yanking her arm free.

Hopper looked nervously at the bedroom door, which was just long enough for Mac to get to the front door. When he looked back she had gotten all the locks undone and was grabbing her purse and jacket from where they were hanging on a hook. She pulled the door open and headed out into the night, but Hopper was right on her heels. As she followed the snow covered path back to where they parked their cars, she jammed her arms into the sleeves of her coat, tugging it on awkwardly, and then fumbled with the zipper.

“Mackenna, please stop. Listen, I’m sorry. Can you please just come back inside and we can talk about this?” Hopper pleaded softly.

“Jim Hopper, don’t you dare try to sweet talk me now.”

“Please, baby...just talk to me.”

Mac sighed and paused, but didn’t make any moves to turn around.

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It was long dark by the time Mac closed up shop and headed to pick up El from the Byers house. When she pulled into the driveway, there were already two other cars parked there. A maroon BMW with Indiana plates and a blue Camaro with California plates. She recognized the BMW; she had seen Steve Harrington driving it around town a few times and assumed he was babysitting for Joyce Byers that night. But the Camaro, on the other hand, was new to her.

Mac parked her powder blue VW Beetle behind the BMW and climbed out. She was only a few steps from the front door when she heard the shouting coming from inside. She could distinctly make out

the sound of a handful of younger kids and two older kids. When she made it to the door, she began to piece together what everyone was actually yelling about.

“Stop it! You’re gonna kill him!” she heard someone say.

“Shut the fuck up or you’re next, you little shit!” an older voice shouted in reply.

Without hesitation, Mac reached for the knob and pushed through the door. She entered into what clearly was already a losing fight. Steve was on the living room floor on his back, another teenage boy on top of him landing punch after punch into his face and head. In the doorway to the kitchen, El and her friends stood in a nervous huddle, watching in shock as their babysitter got beat to a pulp.

“Hey! What the hell’s going on here? Stop that, right now!” Mac yelled, immediately moving to try to pull the young man off Steve.

“Fuck off, lady!” the young man replied, shrugging her off when she tried to grab his shirt.

“Billy stop! You’re killing him!” one of the children, a redhead girl, screamed.

“Shut the fuck up, Max!” Billy yelled back.

“Get off him!” Mac said, finally managing to get a good grip on the back of Billy’s shirt.

Suddenly Billy paused his assault on Steve. In half an instant he had wound up and backhanded Mac hard across the left temple. “What the fuck did I just say to you, bitch?” he screamed, standing up and turning to face her.

Mac stumbled backwards blindly, her glasses broken and askew on her face as Billy stalked after her, a hand outstretched. His fingers clamped down hard around her throat and Mac slammed into the wall behind her. She spluttered as the air was knocked from her lungs and when she opened her mouth to suck in a new breath, she found Billy’s grip made it impossible. Eyes popping in fear, she scratched at Billy’s hand and kicked at his legs. But the wild look in Billy’s eyes

told her there wasn't a chance he was going to let up anytime soon.

Black spots started to dance at the edges of her vision as unconsciousness began to creep in. Mac tried to struggle, but the longer she went without oxygen, the harder it became. She was sure this boy was going to kill her when suddenly he was ripped from her and tossed like a sack of potatoes across the room. His body hit the opposite wall and slid to the floor with an awkward and terrible thud. For a moment, the room was completely silent.

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The air was bitter cold, but Mac made no moves to follow Hopper back inside. Instead she stood there with her back to him and shivered in her coat. When she heard his slow footsteps coming closer to her, the snow crunching under his boots, she held up a hand. He stopped and waited, the only sounds the rustling of dead tree branches in the wind.

"I'm just...really rattled, Jim. That kid could've killed me and then El...I've never seen her use her powers like that before." Mac explained quietly.

"Mackenna!" Hopper shouted exasperatedly. "Would you please just tell me what the hell happened tonight?"

Finally she turned on him, angry again, "Fine, Hopper! You know what happened? I went to pick up your daughter like the good girlfriend that I am. Like the fucking normal girlfriend that I am. Not caught up in your whole twisted life!"

"That's not fucking fair, Mac."

"I don't give a *fuck* about fair, Hopper! What's not fair is that I tried to do something *nice* for you and got caught in the middle of something completely insane."

"Tell me about it! Would you please? For the love of God, Mackenna. Please just tell me what the hell happened so we can be done with it!"

"You want to know what happened?"

“Yes! That’s what I’ve been fucking asking you.”

“Shut up, Hopper! Just let me speak!” she shouted back at him.

He ground his teeth, just as frustrated with her as she was with him.

“I went to pick up *your daughter* only to find whatshisface...Billy Hargrove beating the everliving crap out of the babysitter. I went to pick up *your daughter* only to get backhanded by said shithead and then literally choked out within an inch of my life. But then *your daughter* uses her goddamn *mind powers* to toss the kid across the room like he weighed no more than a loaf of bread!

“Then not only did I have to make sure Steve Harrington wasn’t dead on Joyce Byers’ living room floor, but I had to make sure *your fucking daughter* didn’t just murder a teenage boy after he basically tried to murder me! And then I had to drive her back here, because I couldn’t just leave her there after I told you I would get her. Because this is the fucking assbackwards world I live in now!

“So forgive me, Hopper if right now all I want to do is go home to my own apartment, to my own normal life where the only strange thing that happens is someone orders fifty potted marigolds for no apparent reason!”

Hopper stood there, the angry clench to his jaw completely gone. His eyebrows knitted together in concern as Mac’s shoulders heaved in angry breaths. She glanced past him to the front door of the cabin and he heard it quickly snick shut. Both of them knew El had been listening. Both of their hearts broke at the same time. Mac turned away as tears started to prick her eyes. Hopper took a deep breath.

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After that day at the library, Hopper started making a point of trying to see Mac whenever he could. At first he would make excuses to visit the library. To do research for a case, to look up an old article, to find new books for El. He would walk past the fiction shelves slowly, glancing out of the corner of his eye not to look like he was actively seeking her out. If he noticed she was there, he would strategically position himself to run into her and strike up a

conversation.

When he started to realize bumping into her at the library all the time was getting obvious, he changed tactics. He went to her shop and ordered flowers to give to Flo, or to leave on Barbara Holland's grave. He would stay for a few moments though just to talk to her, to see the way she smiled at him. Until eventually he mustered up the courage to ask her out for a drink. When she agreed, the shock and anxiousness reminded him of being a teenager asking a girl out for the first time.

Drinks turned into dinner and dinner turned into movie nights and movie nights turned into meeting El and watching TV on the couch. Through it all, Jim was stunned that this young, beautiful woman would ever want a fat, old man like him. But Mac insisted she loved his curves, the salt and pepper in his beard, the crows feet around his eyes. Most of all she loved the way he made her feel safe and secure. When they were alone she teased that they were beauty and the beast.

"So I got us tickets to a show on Friday night. Do you think you can make that happen?" Mac asked him when he called her from work one day.

Hopper aimlessly pushed a pen around on his desk, "A show? What kind of show?"

"A concert, Hop. It's not a musical or something, so calm down."

"Alright, alright." he sighed. "What kind of concert?"

Mac chuckled and Hopper was sure she was rolling her eyes at him, "A rock concert. I was trying to make it kind of a surprise. It's that Zeppelin cover band you're always telling me about. They're playing at the Castle Club."

"You got tickets to Greta Van Fleet?"

"Yes, Jim. I got tickets to Greta Van Fleet. Now can you make it happen or what?"

"Hell yeah I can!"

On Friday night, Hopper pulled into the alley next to the florist shop and parked. He climbed out and went around back, climbing up the stairwell to Mac's apartment over the shop. He knocked on the door and waited, turning the brim of his hat over in his hands. There was a soft crash, followed by muffled cursing, and then the door was yanked open. Mac grinned at him, pretending like she hadn't just knocked over the potted plant that was clearly broken across the floor.

"Hey! Hey...come in! I'm almost ready I just...this damn plant, you know? It just jumped right out at me!" she told him, gingerly pushing her hair back from her face with the back of her palm.

Hopper watched her go, biting his lip as he took her in, "I didn't know we were getting dressed up." he commented.

She glanced up at him from where she had crouched down to start picking up pieces of the shattered pot, "What?"

"Your outfit, Mac."

Mac looked down at her clothes, redness coming to her cheeks and ears, nearly matching her hair and lipstick. She was wearing an acid washed denim jacket, a loose fitting white tee shirt, and a tight, black leather mini-skirt. Her legs were covered by slightly torn black tights and she had white high-top sneakers on. Her long red hair was the only thing she had mostly left alone. It appeared to have a little more hairspray than usual, but otherwise was her normal style.

She stood up quickly, "Is it too much? Oh...no, it's too much, isn't it? I just thought...I've never really been to a concert like this and...I didn't know..." she stammered.

"Mac..." Hopper said gently as she continued to ramble in her panic. "Mac...Mackenna!"

She stopped mid sentence, "What?"

"You look incredible."

"What?" she asked again, eyes wide as saucers and a small smudge of potting soil on her cheek.

Hopper stepped forward, careful not to tread on any of the debris and reached to rub the dirt off her cheek with his thumb, “You look fucking hot. I’m not gonna be able to keep the guys off you tonight.”

“Oh!” Mac exclaimed and if it was even possible, turned an even deeper shade of crimson.

“Come on, we’re gonna be late.” Hopper said finally, giving her a chaste kiss on the temple as he passed her to get the broom and dustpan.

Hopper drove Mac’s VW to the club since neither of them wanted to pull up in Hopper’s Blazer. There was a line outside of the club of people waiting to get in. But it didn’t take long before the bouncer started filing people through the door. Mac handed over her tickets to the man at the door, who not-so-subtly gave her a once over. She could feel Hopper bristling as he placed his hand firmly on the small of her back. A moment later, the man handed back their tickets and allowed them inside.

“Are you going to growl like a dog at everyone we see tonight?” Mac mumbled to Hopper as they made their way through the growing crowd to the bar.

“Absolutely,” he replied. Then added, “Maybe I should’a had you change after all.”

Mac stopped and looked up at him, horrified, “See! I knew I should’ve worn something normal!” she said.

But Hopper just laughed, “I’m kidding, Mac. Seriously you look great.” he told her and she seemed to relax.

“Okay...okay. I believe you.”

“I’m just being the big, bad boyfriend, that’s all.”

“Hmm...the big, bad boyfriend, huh?”

“That’s what I am, right?”

Mac quirked an eyebrow at him above the frame of her glasses, “I

suppose..."

"You suppose?"

Mac just gave him a coy smile and stretched up on her tiptoes to kiss the corner of his mouth. He couldn't help but grin as her hand also reached to give his ass a little squeeze. Before he could reciprocate, Mac pulled away, continuing on through the crowd. Chuckling to himself and reaching up to scratch his beard, he dove after her. The opening band had just come on stage and the noise level had risen considerably. This was certainly going to be a fun night, Hopper thought to himself.

They made it to the bar and Hopper leaned in to flag down the bartender, "Two whiskeys, neat, please." he ordered, putting down a few bills.

Mac leaned casually against the bar, her elbows on the counter so she could watch the stage, "It's strange, you know? That word." she yelled over the din.

"What word?" Hopper called back.

"Boyfriend."

Hopper grinned at her, intrigued, "Why's that?"

She looked at him finally, a glint in her eye that Hopper hadn't seen before, "Because we're not kids, Chief. I feel like there should be some kind of adult equivalent."

"Oh yeah?" he said, knowing she had called him Chief intentionally.
"Like what?"

"I don't know!"

Hopper moved to stand over her, purposefully pushing his knee between her legs, "What about lovers?"

"Can we really say we're lovers, Chief?" she replied, just barely loud enough for him to hear.

Hopper could almost see the flutter of Mac's heartbeat in her throat as she gazed up at him through hooded eyes. Could almost feel the heat rising off her skin. They hadn't yet slept together, but it wasn't like the thought never crossed Hopper's mind. From the moment he saw her in the library, the sun turning her hair to molten copper and catching the silver in her pale blue eyes, he wanted nothing more than to kiss every inch of her. But he also felt the fierce need to protect her and respect her in any way he could. So they had kissed and even napped together on the couch. But it had never gone farther than that.

Suddenly the bartender slid two glasses up behind Mac's elbow and her eyes were pulled away from him, the moment passed. Hopper moved back to stand next to her, so he could also see the stage and passed her a drink. They sipped and watched the opening band play. When it seemed they were almost done, they finished their drinks before making their way towards the stage. Hopper's size allowed him to easily force his way forwards until eventually there were only a handful of people still in front of them.

The headlining band, Greta Van Fleet came on moments later and immediately launched into their first set. Hopper tried to pay attention to the band, especially since he had actually been looking forward to seeing them live. But he was distracted when Mac started to dance. He had seen her dance before at the cabin with El to some of Hopper's old records. This dancing though wasn't like that. It was smoother, more fluid. Like top shelf honey whiskey or a fine cigar. He was entranced by her. More than anything, he was getting very, very turned on.

The band stopped for a brief break, so Hopper and Mac returned to the bar for another drink. Hopper had always been glad that Mac was a whiskey drinker like himself. It made it easy for him to order for her, but it also meant she got drunk faster than if she just wanted a beer or a glass of wine. She did drink wine sometimes, usually when they were at her place and he had to admit that she was no lightweight. But after a couple glasses of whiskey, she was definitely becoming a little more loose.

They stayed at the bar for the second set and Mac ordered a third drink. Hopper resisted, knowing he would have to drive them home

later. Mac continued to dance and Hopper continued to watch her. He licked his lips as her hips swayed to the beat of the music. When she turned to face him, a devilish grin across her ruby red lips, he had to hold onto his own hands to keep from jumping her right then and there.

Eventually the band announced they were playing their last song and Hopper decided he couldn't take it any longer. He reached for Mac, pulling her into him so he could whisper in her ear. His grip was firm and the very feeling of her pressed against him was driving him mad. She looked up at him innocently, like she didn't know exactly what she'd been doing to him all night. He wondered if this had been her plan all along.

"I need to take you home." he growled in her ear.

He watched her tongue snake out to trace along her lips, "Now? There's only one song left." she replied, clearly toying with him.

"Yes, now."

"If you insist, Chief."

He nearly shivered as he steered her towards the door. It was early fall, so the air was brisk when they got outside. Mac huddled against Hopper as they rushed back to the car. Though they definitely weren't rushing only because of the cold. Hopper had a white knuckle grip on the steering wheel as he drove them the half mile back to Mac's apartment. She kept one hand draped casually on his thigh. When he pulled into her parking spot in the alley, he turned the car off and then dove on her.

Hopper kissed her fiercely, pushing her back into the passenger door. Her mouth tasted like whiskey and he didn't even care that he was smearing her lipstick. Mac's hands roamed his body, her fingers finally bunching up the front of his shirt. Their breath came heavy and she writhed against him, gasping for air between kisses. He deserted her lips and trailed kisses down her jaw to her throat, breathing in the floral, clean smell of her hair.

"Hop...we should go inside." she mumbled finally.

Hopper grunted, taking a moment longer before moving away so they could get out of the car. She held a hand out to him and led him up the stairs to her door, but he couldn't make it even that far. He pressed her against the door and kissed her again and again. Eventually she twisted around to unlock the door and push it open. They tumbled into the dark apartment.

Once inside, Hopper kicked the door shut and grabbed Mac. He put each of her arms over his shoulders and then lifted her by her thighs to carry her to her bedroom. She giggled and despite the fact that she made him feel like a wild animal, he smiled too. She tossed her head back when she laughed and he kissed the thin skin under her chin which only made her laugh more. He soon found himself laughing with her.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"It tickles! Your beard!" she gasped.

"Oh this? This tickles?" he answered, rubbing his beard against her jaw and neck.

She squealed and squirmed in his arms, "Jim! Stop!"

Hopper grinned, "No way."

He continued kissing her and the laughter stopped, turning yet again into that slow burning fire. When he made it to her bed, he put her down and looked her over in the glow from the streetlights outside her window. Even in the dim light, she looked otherworldly. He was once again blown away by the fact that she still wanted him, that she wanted him in this way. Mac reached for his belt and he was assured all over again.

In the morning, when the sun started to rise Mac woke to Hopper's warm breath ruffling her hair. His bare skin was almost too warm against hers under the covers. She rolled over to face him and reached up to run her fingertips along his jaw. She had to admit she thought Hopper might be the most handsome man she'd ever seen. He wasn't the most physically fit, but he was strong and caring and he seemed willing to do anything for her. He'd even made an effort to

try to quit smoking when she admitted it was the one thing she *didn't* like about him.

Hopper's lips pulled into a smile, but he didn't open his eyes, "Morning, you." he grumbled.

"Morning..." she mumbled back.

"How long've you been up?"

"Not long,"

"Good..." Hopper answered, pulling her into him tighter and snuggling his face down into the crook of her neck. "Can we just stay here all day?"

"We sure could try. Though I think the Wheeler's might not want another child."

"Eh...El can take care of herself. She's got superpowers."

Mac was quiet for a moment, wondering what Hopper meant by that. There had always been this air of mystery over how El came to be in Hopper's care. Mac had never asked and had always assumed the girl was just some kind of runaway that Hopper took in out of the goodness of his heart. But she had heard rumors of strange happenings in Hawkins. Being the smart woman that she was, she had to wonder if the two were connected somehow.

"Jim..." she whispered.

Hopper grunted in response.

"Where did El come from?"

She felt Hopper tense slightly before he pulled back to look at her. His rich blue eyes glinted seriously in the morning sunlight, "What do you mean?" he asked her.

"You know..." Mac said, suddenly feeling like she said the wrong thing. "You've never told me about how you adopted her...how it all happened."

"It's a long story." he said.

Mac chewed her lip, "Okay...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, you know...pry. I was just wondering..."

A small reassuring smile played on Hopper's lips, "Mac, no...honestly I should've told you when you met El. But it can be...kind of a lot to take in." he admitted.

"What does that mean?"

"Come over for dinner tomorrow night, okay? Come over for dinner and I promise El and I will explain everything."

"Okay, Hop. I'll come over for dinner."

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"Mackenna...I'm sorry. Please, just come back inside."

Mac hung her head and whispered, "I don't think I can be near her."

For a moment Hopper just breathed. He knew someday this moment would come, he just hadn't ever expected it to come from Mac. In the scattered moonlight, he watched as Mac's shoulders started to tremble and heard the soft sob that escaped her lips. Without another thought, he went to her even as she once again protested against him. He stepped around her and pulled her into his chest. She continued to cry.

"It's gonna be okay, Mac. Alright? You're safe. No one's going to hurt you."

"I know El would never really try to hurt me...she saved my life tonight for Heaven's sake! But...all that power. It's terrifying."

"You hardly even know." Hopper mumbled, more to himself than anything. "Please just come back inside."

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Mac arrived at the cabin about fifteen minutes late for dinner. She

was coming from the florist shop where a customer had kept her past closing. By the time she managed to close up, run upstairs to grab the apple cobbler she made for dessert, clean up the mess she made when she dropped the carton of double cream for whipped cream, and stopped to pick up another carton she was feeling a bit frazzled. She rushed down the autumn leaf covered path to the cabin and up the few steps to the door.

She had known about the secret knock for a while. From the first time she had ever been to the cabin, Hopper had told her about the knock. He had never really explained why he and El used it, but she assumed it was because he often left her home alone. A regular latchkey kid. Either way as she shuffled the cobbler and carton of cream in her arms to reach up and knock, she knew she'd probably find out the real answer later that night.

Rap rap...rap...rap rap rap.

The locks clattered one by one and then the door was yanked open, El grinning warmly on the other side, “Hello, Mac! You’re late.” she said.

“El, come on. You know that’s not nice.” Hopper grumbled from the kitchen.

El glanced at him, “Right...sorry.” she said sheepishly.

Mac smiled down at her, “It’s okay, sweetheart. May I still come in?”

“Yes!” El said, stepping out of the way. “What is that?”

“This?” Mac asked, holding up the cobbler. El nodded, “It’s an apple cobbler for dessert. And some cream we can whip up to go on top.”

“Cobbler?” El asked curiously, turning the word over in her mouth.

“Uhm...well I guess it’s kind of like apple pie, but with the crust all mixed in.”

“Sounds delicious.” Hopper said, finally coming over to slide a hand around Mac’s waist and kiss her temple.

“I’m just glad I didn’t drop the cobbler.”

Hopper grinned knowingly, “What did you drop instead?” he asked.

“The cream of course. And I’m sure it got under the fridge. My apartment’s going to smell like rotten milk for the rest of time.”

“I’ll come by later this week and help you move it so you can clean it up.”

“Thank you, Jim. I really do appreciate it.”

“Do you have a book for me?” El asked.

Mac smacked the palm of her hand to her forehead, “Oh, shoot! I totally forgot! I’m so sorry, El. I had a book all picked out and I left it on the counter.”

El nodded, but to Mac’s relief didn’t look as disappointed as she thought she would be, “That’s okay.”

“I promise I’ll give it to your dad as soon as I can and he can bring it home to you, okay?”

“Will you read another book tonight?”

“Sure, hun. I can do that.”

El scampered off to her room, Hopper and Mac watching her go. “Does that need to go in the fridge?” Hopper asked suddenly.

Mac looked up at him almost in a daze, “Oh...right, yeah. The cream does, the cobbler can stay on the counter for now.” she said, letting him take it from her.

“You okay? You seem out of sorts.”

“Sorry, I guess I am. It was kind of a long day.”

“Are you sure you want to do this tonight then?”

Hopper was eyeing her, the concern written in the wrinkle of his brow, “Absolutely. I want to know everything, Hop. I mean, you

make it sound like you're going to tell me a bunch of government secrets or something." Mac joked.

Hopper didn't laugh, but turned away instead, "You're not far off..." he mumbled to himself.

"What's for dinner anyway? I'm starved!"

"Lasagna, I helped!" El replied, returning from her room with three different books in her hands.

"El let's leave the books on the couch for now. Can you go wash your hands, please?" Hopper asked.

El did as she was told, dumping the books on the couch and then going to the kitchen sink to wash her hands. Mac helped Hopper set the table and then they all sat down to eat. Over dinner they chatted about work and El told Mac about what she was doing with her homeschool tutor. Which reminded Mac that this was another strange thing about them. All of El's friends went to the local public school, but El had a tutor that came to the cabin four times a week. Mac also recognized that El's vocabulary was significantly lacking for a girl her age.

When they were done eating dinner, Hopper cleared the table and got to work whipping up the cream while Mac helped El with some of her science homework. Hopper served them each a dish of Mac's cobbler with the freshly whipped cream and then sat down again. This time Mac could tell things were more serious. It was time to get down to business. It was time Hopper told her everything.

"Before I tell you anything, I need you to understand that everything I tell you tonight, you *cannot* tell anyone else. Everything I'm about to tell you is secret. I'm only telling you because I trust you. But also because I know you won't be in as much danger as say...if I told you a year ago."

"Jeeze, Jim...I didn't realize it was all so serious."

"Do you promise not to tell anyone?"

"Of course, I promise."

Hopper nodded slowly. Then he launched into the story. He started with Will Byers' disappearance. He explained that he didn't just get lost in the woods like everyone thought. He told her about another dimension with a monster that crossed through into their world. El corrected him and called the monster a demogorgon from the Upside Down. For a while, Mac thought they were just messing with her. Telling her a scary story to get her riled up. But then the story kept going.

He explained about what really happened to Barbara Holland. Explained about the government scientists who made a deal with Hopper to keep it all a secret. Then he explained about El's biological mother, Terry Ives and the illegal government experiments she was part of. He told Mac about how Terry Ives was tricked into thinking she had miscarried her child, but in reality El had been born with the very abilities they hoped to create in her mother.

"El, would you like to show Mackenna what you can do?" Hopper asked the young girl.

One moment everything was normal, they were sitting around the table together eating cobbler and telling stories. Then the next Mac's whole perception of the world around her was turned, for lack of better words, upside down. The TV across the room suddenly switched on, the channels flipping until it landed on some kind of sappy black and white film. Mac jumped and turned to look at it, only to watch as the books El had put on the couch before dinner started to float up in the air. They crossed the room and landed in a neat pile on the kitchen table. Moments later, the TV switched off again.

Mac gaped at El with wide eyes as El glanced worriedly at Hopper, "You can't be serious. You're playing a trick on me. This is just some kind of magic trick." she said.

Hopper shook his head, "It's not a trick, Mac."

"Not a trick." El parroted.

Mac sat in stunned silence, "So everything I read in the paper...everything I heard on the news. It was all a lie?"

"For the most part, yes. They lied to keep the town safe. To keep the town from going into hysteria."

"I...I don't know what to say."

There was a pause while Mac tried to take it all in. Then El asked quietly, "Are you...afraid...of me?"

Mac looked at the girl, at the concern and fear on her face and quickly shook her head. She reached out to run a hand over El's curls, smoothing them down the back of her head, "Oh no, sweetheart. I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid at all. I'm just trying to make sense of it all. It doesn't exactly fall into the science and reality I thought I knew."

El seemed puzzled by what Mac said. "She's just a little confused. Kind of like how Joyce was, remember? When she found out about your powers." Hopper explained gently.

"Yes." El said, nodding. "I remember."

Mac sat back in her chair, "I certainly see why you two live all the way out here now. And all the rest..."

"I try to give El the most normal life she can have. We were even able to get her a birth certificate. But obviously we still have to be careful. El knows the limits of her powers. She knows what will happen if more people knew about them."

El nodded gravely at Hopper. "Right of course..." Mac said, touching her fingers to her lips.

There were a million questions Mac wanted to ask, but in that moment she wasn't sure she could handle any more answers. So instead she checked her watch and then pushed back from the table. She gathered up their empty dishes and brought them to the sink. Hopper and El stayed put, as if waiting with bated breath to see how Mac would react. Mac took a deep breath, bracing herself for a moment on the counter and then looked back at the two of them.

Despite the fact that she saw them in an entirely new light, the man in front of her was still Hopper, still the man she was growing to

love. And El, with her beautiful curls and curious eyes was still the same girl who fell asleep on her shoulder watching TV and needed help with her science homework. So she put her confusion, her worries, and her questions aside for right then and gave them a small, tentative smile.

“Alright well if you still want your bedtime story, you better go get ready.” she said.

El’s face lit up and she dashed off, the stack of books following behind her as if carried by a ghost. Mac watched them go, unable to hide the look of befuddlement on her face. Hopper stood slowly from the table and went to Mac. He reached to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Mac’s ear and she leaned into the warmth of his palm on her cheek. Even this small gesture brought a sense of security to her.

“Are you sure you’re okay with all of this?” Hopper asked quietly so El wouldn’t hear.

Mac nodded and looked up into his eyes, “Every family has secrets. Some more than others, I suppose. If I’m going to be part of this one, I kind of have to be. Don’t I?”

A warm smile grew on Hopper’s lips, “Family?”

“Isn’t that what you two are? A family?”

He shrugged and leaned to kiss her forehead, letting his lips linger there as he said, “I guess I just like hearing you say it.”

“I’m falling in love with you, Jim Hopper.” Mac whispered. “I’ll believe anything you tell me.”

Hopper’s heart pounded, matching the raging rhythm in Mac’s own chest, “I never thought I’d ever say this again, but I’m falling for you, too Mackenna Kinney. From day one...you stole my heart in that library.”

“Well I’m not giving it back.” Mac teased, grinning at Hopper as he leaned in to kiss her lips.

“It’s the price I’ll have to pay.”

“I’m ready!” El shouted suddenly from her bedroom.

Mac winked at Hopper, “I’ve been summoned.”

❖❖❖❖

Mac sat on Hopper’s bed, listening with her heart in her throat as he went to knock softly on El’s door. At first the young girl didn’t answer, but then Hopper pleaded with her and a moment later Mac heard the door click open. She listened as Hopper crossed the room to sit on the edge of El’s bed. She could picture him reaching out, putting one of his massive hands over one of hers. She could picture El curling her tiny fingers into his.

Mac could just hear El when she said, voice trembling, “She is afraid of me.”

Both Hopper and Mac made a strangled noise, “No, El. Mac isn’t afraid of you. She’s just shaken up, that’s all.”

“But she said...” El started.

“I know what she said. But you have to understand, El that sometimes when grownups are upset they say things they don’t really mean. You know that. Like when we had that fight and I yelled at you. But I only said it because I was angry and worried about you.”

“Yes...”

“I think Mac was scared about what happened to *her*. What Billy did to her. I think Mac is grateful that you were there to help her. That you saved her from the bad man.”

“I should have stopped him before. I could have stopped him before.”

“I know, but it’s okay. It’s over now.”

“He won’t hurt anyone else. I made him promise.”

“I’m sure you did. But I need you to promise me something now, okay?”

“Okay...”

“I need you to promise me, El that you won’t use your powers like that unless it’s absolutely an emergency.”

“Emergency?”

“Like what happened tonight. If you think someone is going to get really hurt, like Mac. I know you know that, but I need you to promise me anyway.”

“I promise.”

“Okay, good.”

“Can I talk to Mac?”

Mac sucked in a breath and Hopper paused, “In the morning, hun. Okay? Let’s just give her a little time. Can you do that?” he said finally.

“Yes,” El replied disappointedly.

“Alright, well lie down now. Get some sleep.”

“Night, dad.”

“Night, kid.”

El’s door clicked shut and Mac heard Hopper’s heavy footsteps as he crossed the living room to his bedroom door. He entered the room and shut the door again behind him. Mac looked at him with watery eyes, her whole body trembling. Gently Hopper scooped her up into his arms before turning to sit on the bed, holding her close to his chest. He let her cry until she was too exhausted to cry anymore. Then he changed her out of her clothes into one of his flannel shirts and tucked her into bed. He climbed in behind her and pulled her against his body, pressing soft kisses behind her ear.

“I’d be a terrible mother to her.” Mac whispered finally.

Hopper shook his head, his nose moving her hair, “No, Mac, you

wouldn't."

"But look what I said! I didn't even try to lower my voice. Even if she hadn't come to the door, she could've heard everything I said."

"Shh..." Hopper said, reaching to turn her head so he could look into her eyes. "Parents fight and they can't always keep it from their children. It happens. You've never done this before and that's okay. You'll make mistakes but you'll learn. That's the best thing about family, Mac. We'll always love you, we'll always forgive you."

"I don't deserve you, Jim Hopper."

Hopper chuckled, "If there's anyone in this house who doesn't deserve someone, it's me."

"Then I guess that makes us quite the pair."

"I guess so."

2. Part Two

Summary for the Chapter:

Mac has to make a choice she doesn't want to make.
But not making it could ruin everything.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey.....think you can spot the sneaky 80s reference I snuck in there? I'll post the answer in the end notes!

A young woman stood on the deck of a small cottage overlooking a pond. The sun was beginning to rise and she watched as a morning fog rose from the surface of the water. A loon glided elegantly by, softly wailing in the haze. The spring air was chilly on her bare legs, sending a shiver up her spine. She pulled the collar of the oversized flannel shirt she was wearing up around her chin, breathing in its musky scent. Behind her in the bedroom, a man stirred awake realizing the young woman was no longer there.

"Mac?" he mumbled into the dim room.

Hawkins Police Chief, Jim Hopper pawed at the sheets, searching blindly for the young woman who he thought had been there moments ago. When his large hand didn't find her, he sat up on one elbow and squinted groggily around the room. Across from the bed, he noticed the door to the deck was slightly ajar. A cool breeze from outside was ruffling the long curtains that blocked out the light. Hopper swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, reaching for a pair of jeans discarded on the floor.

The Chief pulled on the jeans, but didn't bother zipping or buttoning them. He shuffled shirtless towards the open door and pulled back the curtain. Once his eyes adjusted to the light, he finally found the person he was looking for. Hopper took a moment to admire the young woman standing on the deck. Even after more than a year he was still blown away by how beautiful she was. He had to remind himself every day that she was just as attracted to him.

"Mac? What're you doin' up so early?" Hopper mumbled as he stepped out onto the deck.

Mackenna Kinney glanced over her shoulder, her auburn hair catching the light, "Hmm? Sorry, go back to bed. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

"A few hours."

"Mackenna..." Hopper reproved. He came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist, "You need to rest."

Mac leaned her head against Hopper's chest, "I know, I just got caught up with work."

"I know this is your dream or whatever, but you haven't gotten a full night's sleep in over a month."

"I'm alright, Hop. This is what I want."

"That's what worries me."

Mac twisted so she was facing him and stretched up on her toes, placing a sweet kiss on Hopper's lips, "The semester is almost over. I'll get some rest then."

"That's a month away."

Hopper growled as Mac's hand snuck down the front of his jeans and into his underwear. Her silvery blue eyes almost deepened in color as she watched his reaction to her touch. She liked the softer side of Hopper, the side not many people got to see. But she had to admit she loved his rougher side, too. The way he looked at her like he wanted to eat her alive. She pressed her palm down his member, a small smirk playing across her lips when it twitched. Hopper's eyes fluttered shut.

"Damn, woman. You're just...trying to distract me." he struggled to say, a low rumble in his chest. "We can't...anyway...El's here."

"Nope, I dropped her off at the Byers' last night. Remember?" Mac clarified. "We're all alone."

Hopper grinned, "Well then...in that case."

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"Okay, alright you two. Come on! Come sit! I have an announcement." Mac said, herding Hopper and El to take a seat on the living room couch.

"Mac, the potatoes are going to burn in the oven if I don't take them out!" Hopper protested.

They all looked over as the oven door opened, three baked potatoes floated out and landed with a soft, slightly crispy plop on the stovetop. Hopper shot El a look and she shrugged silently, moving to curl up on the couch. Outside a large blanket of snow slid off the cabin roof followed by a gust of frigid air that swept through the room from the gaps in the windows. It was as if the tiny cabin shivered in the presence of El's powers.

"Thanks, El." Mac smiled. "Now come on, sit! Sit!"

Once they were both sitting Mac stayed standing in front of them, pacing and wringing her fingers. El's eyes followed the young woman go back and forth across the well worn carpet as if she was watching a tennis match. Hopper waited patiently for a few moments until his stomach rumbled hungrily. He had gotten home late for dinner and was starving. Mac had been so anxious about her announcement she forgot about dinner until Hopper knocked on the door.

"What's the big deal, Mac?" Hopper asked finally.

"Well, you know how I've always wanted to become a biology teacher?" Mac said, chewing her lip. "But I never got to continue my degrees and whatnot."

"Right?"

"Well...old Ms. Radcliff finally decided to take her retirement at the end of this school year."

"Really? I thought she would've stayed at that school until she literally died behind her desk." Hopper commented under his breath.

Mac shot him a look and he shrugged, "But anyway, the school has started searching for a replacement to start in the fall. I applied as soon as I saw the listing in the paper. I'm not exactly qualified but I could be...and well, they hired me!"

Hopper and El's faces both lit up, "Wow, hun! That's great!" Hopper said.

"Yes...exciting." El agreed, looking proud of herself for picking out the correct word.

"Right well, I'll have to start night courses now to get my teaching certification. Then when that's done I can consider starting a masters degree or skip right to a PhD program."

"P-H-D?" El inquired.

Mac smiled, "It means I'll be a doctor. But not a medical doctor or a mind doctor like the one Will sees. I'll be a doctor of *science* ." she explained.

El squirmed excitedly, "Bitchin!"

Hopper and Mac laughed, "Yes, it will be pretty bitchin if I can pull it off."

"I'm very excited for you, Mac. This is great news!" Hopper said, standing to go to her.

"I know, it's going to be so much work but I feel like it's what I need to do."

Hopper pulled Mac into a warm hug and gave her a kiss on the lips. Moments later, El came over to stretch her arms as far around the two of them as she could. Mac freed an arm of her own to put around El's shoulders. She couldn't think of a time when she was happier in her life. It had taken her a long time but Mac was finally getting around to fulfilling her dreams. She would have to give up the florist shop, but she knew her grandfather would have supported her choice

if he was still alive.

A loud, rolling grumble sounded from Hopper's belly and El giggled, "Can we eat now?" he asked.

Mac rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling when she said, "Yes, Jim. We can eat now."

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Hopper traced lazy circles on Mac's bare back. She was lying on her stomach with her head on a pillow, gazing sleepily up at Hopper. He smiled down at her, leaning to kiss her forehead and then pulled the sheets up around her waist. Mac was struggling to stay awake, even though it was almost half-past eight in the morning. Granted she hadn't slept much the night before and the roll in the sheets with Hopper wasn't helping.

"Sleep, Mac. I can go pick up El before I stop over at the station." Hopper mumbled to her.

"I have to study...and I have homework to grade."

Hopper leaned to kiss Mac's shoulder, "You spent all night studying. And besides, it's Saturday. I want you to sleep for a couple more hours. Then you can go back to work." he insisted.

"But there's so much to do...the house is a mess."

"El can clean the house. She should really start having chores, anyway."

Mac's eyes slowly sunk shut, "I guess I could sleep for a few hours..." she mumbled.

Hopper smoothed his hand over her hair, "Just sleep, hun. I'll be home for lunch."

"Mhm..." Sleep started to take Mac away, but she remembered one more thing. "I told Joyce...pick El up at nine."

"Don't you worry 'bout a thing. Just sleep."

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“Well it’s done. I sign over the deed to the shop next week sometime.”

Hopper could tell by the slump of Mac’s shoulders and the way she picked at the cocktail napkin under her beer that she was not looking forward to that event. As excited as she was to start her new job at the high school and the PhD program she’d been accepted to only a few days before, it was clear letting go of the florist was going to be the hardest part. He knew she was brilliant enough to take the other parts in stride. But the shop had been a part of her for almost as long as she’d been alive.

The couple had met for a drink after Hopper got off his shift one summer evening. The bar was mostly dead, as it almost always was, but there were a handful of college boys in the back playing rounds of darts. It was much too early for them to be drunk, but they were getting a little rowdy. Every few minutes, one of them would shout and attract the attention of the few other patrons in the bar. Hopper wondered if he should say something to them.

“At least it’s someone you trust. I’m sure Mr. Krelborn will take really good care of it.” Hopper offered.

Mac chewed on the inside of her cheek, “Yeah...he said he wouldn’t change much. He even talked about buying new state of the art refrigerators. You know, the ones I couldn’t afford?” she said.

He reached out to rub her back, “It’ll be okay, Mac. Once you get going with all the other stuff, you’ll forget all about the shop.”

“I hope I don’t. I don’t want to forget it.”

“Well...you know what I meant.” Hopper replied, feeling like he said the wrong thing. “You won’t forget, it just won’t worry you as much.”

Mac nodded meekly, “Right...yeah.”

Mac took a pull from her beer, her gaze drifting over to the young men in the back and Hopper tried not to sigh. It bothered him seeing her this depressed. He hadn’t seen her so upset since the time Billy

Hargrove nearly strangled her to death the winter before. It took over a week for her to get back to herself after that incident. Hopper wanted to help her feel better, but wasn't sure how. He worried that his plans for their anniversary coming up might not go over well if she was still down about the shop.

"Alright, well come on. Let's go pick up some ice cream and we can be fat and watch a movie." Hopper said, pulling out his wallet to toss a couple bills on the bar.

Mac gave him a weak smile, took another big gulp of her beer, then slid off her stool, "What movie?"

"Lady's choice."

Hopper winked at her as he reached for her. Mac rolled her eyes, but her smile got a little bigger. If there was something Hopper knew about his girlfriend, it was that she was a sucker for his gentler side. He slipped his arm around her waist and guided her out of the bar. As they headed down the sidewalk to the store, she leaned her head against his shoulder. It's a start, Hopper thought to himself.

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Mac jolted awake a little over an hour after Hopper insisted she sleep. Outside the bedroom door, something was scratching softly at the floor. They didn't have any pets, so for a moment Mac worried that a stray animal had gotten into the cottage somehow. Drool was crusted on Mac's chin and she reached to push her hair out of her face when she sat up. She had gotten it cut to about shoulder length in the fall after another teacher suggested keeping it short would deter head lice. So she was still getting used to keeping it tamed.

"El? Is that you?" Mac called from the bed.

"Yes, sorry Mac." El answered on the other side of the door. "I was trying to be quiet like Hop said."

"What are you doing?"

"Sweeping."

Mac smiled to herself and let out a breath, “Have you picked up the living room?”

“Yes,”

“And the dishes?”

There was a pause in the scratching on the floor, “No...” El answered finally.

“Alright, well let me jump in the shower and then I’ll come help you.”

“Hop told me not to let you do that. He made me promise.” El replied.

Mac rolled her eyes, “Did he now? What exactly did he say?” she asked, knowing El could repeat back word for word what he told her.

“El, you must not let Mac do any housework. I want you to take care of all of it. Let her sleep.”

“What else?”

El hesitated again, “Nothing...”

Mac climbed out of the bed and pulled on Hopper’s flannel shirt again, going to open the door, “What else El?” she said, looking the girl in the eye.

“He said, ‘Use your powers to stop her if you have to.’” El answered, clutching the handle of the broom. “But I don’t think he meant it. Like he told me about how adults say things they don’t mean.”

“Right, you’re exactly right.”

Mac smiled even if she was a little miffed that Hopper would suggest that to the girl. There was no guarantee she would understand he was joking and the consequences would end with Mac held down in a chair by an invisible forcefield. A flash of that teenage boy getting tossed across Joyce Byers’ living room crossed her mind. She didn’t want to think about what that must’ve felt like.

"He said he'd be home at one-one...I mean, one-fifteen." El continued.

Mac glanced back into the bedroom to the clock on the dresser, "Well then that gives us about three hours to get this house spick and span."

"Spick and span?"

"Cleaned up."

El nodded and smiled, "Spick and span."

"Alright, again let me go jump in the shower. Then I'll come see what needs to be done."

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Hopper had big plans for his and Mac's first anniversary. Though much to her frustration he insisted they were all a surprise. Hopper had to take care of a few things at the station before he came to pick her up, so Mac took her time getting ready in the morning. Of course, this led to a number of mishaps including tripping on the corner of the carpet and knocking over a vase of tiger lilies. When Hopper arrived at her apartment and let himself in with his spare key, she screeched and rushed into her bedroom.

"I'm not ready yet! Stay in the living room!" Mac called.

Hopper chuckled and stooped to pick up the heap of soggy paper towels Mac left on the floor, "What fought back this time?" he asked.

"Careful! There's probably still glass. I had some lilies on the console behind the couch."

"Are you almost ready? We have reservations."

Mac raised an eyebrow at herself in the mirror as she dabbed on a little perfume, "Reservations? Really? Jim Hopper made dinner reservations?"

"Yes, it's a special night. Doesn't it call for reservations?" he asked,

taking out a dustpan to sweep up the remaining pieces of glass.

“I suppose so, I’m just shocked is all.” Mac replied, stepping into the hall.

Hopper stood up straight and took her in, “Damn...”

She was wearing a robin’s egg blue empire waist dress patterned with white flowers. The bust criss-crossed and tied around her neck, showing off her freckled shoulders. She wore little white kitten heels and her legs looked incredible. At Hopper’s expression Mac blushed and dropped her eyes, recalling the way he looked at her the day they met. He didn’t look half bad himself in a tidy red shirt and black slacks.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” he said, striding over to wrap his arms around her.

Mac giggled as Hopper twirled her around, “Oh Jim, come on. You’re just trying to butter me up.”

“Maybe later.” Hopper replied with a wink. “For now, we have reservations!”

“Let me just finish cleaning up that vase, okay?”

“I already did.”

Mac smiled, “You’re too good to me, Jim Hopper.”

“And you’re too good *for* me, Mackenna Kinney.”

The couple headed out, Hopper driving Mac’s powder blue VW Beetle to the restaurant across town. When he parked, he jogged around to the passenger door to hold it open and help Mac climb out. As they walked down the sidewalk arm in arm, Mac realized what restaurant they were going to. It had only opened a few weeks before, but everyone in town was already raving about it. She had heard the chef came from Chicago and previously worked at a number of five star restaurants.

“Hop, isn’t this that new place? I heard it’s really expensive.” Mac

mumbled.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s our anniversary.”

“I know...I just don’t want you breaking the bank just to take me out for a nice dinner. You know I’m happy just getting a burger down at Frankie’s.”

“We always go to the diner. I wanted this night to be different.” Hopper admitted.

As they got to the door, the host came to hold it open for them. Hopper ushered Mac in ahead of him, gentlemanly as always. The host quickly returned to his podium and scanned through his reservations book. When he found Hopper’s name, he smiled and then showed them to their table. It was only big enough for the two of them, with chairs on either side and was next to the plant-filled window. Fairy lights were strung around the room, giving everything a very intimate atmosphere.

Almost every table was filled and their waiter had to scoot around the room to avoid bumping into anyone. “May I get you anything to drink to start?” he asked when he reached their table, folding his hands politely in front of his black cumberbund.

“Uh, sure, yeah. What kind of wine would you recommend?” Hopper asked awkwardly.

“Well it would depend of course on what you’ll be having for dinner. But I can say if you prefer red wine, we have a lovely bottle of 1974 Catalans sangiovese. Or for white the 1980 Diamond Creek sauvignon blanc is excellent as well.”

Hopper hesitated, clearly out of his depth, “We’ll try the red.” he answered finally.

“Very good choice, sir.” the waiter said with a curt nod and then left them.

Mac was grinning at her beau when he looked back at her, “Very good choice, Chief.” she teased.

Hopper rolled his eyes, “Alright so I don’t know shit about wine.”

“It’s fine. I hardly do, myself.” she replied sweetly.

“Is red okay? Did you want white?”

“No, no red is fine.” Hopper let out a visible sigh, so Mac slid her hand across the table to cover his. “Hey, it’s fine. You did fine.”

Hopper smiled, twining his fingers into hers, “Sorry, I’m just a little nervous.”

“I can tell. What do you have to be nervous about? You know you don’t have to do fancy stuff to impress me. I love you just how you are.”

“I know, and I love you, too.” he said, pausing. “It’s nothing...I’m just not used to these uppity restaurants.”

“Again, Hop. We could’ve just gone down to the diner.”

“No, I want this to be special.”

“Okay, Jim. If you say so.” Mac said.

The waiter returned with their wine, pouring a small amount for Hopper to approve. Mac pressed her lips together, trying not to giggle as Hopper pretended like he knew what he was doing. He drank the whole glass in one big gulp, the waiter clearly taken aback, and then nodded roughly. The waiter forced a polite smile, poured them both a glass and then placed the rest of the bottle into the wine stand beside the table.

“Do you know what you would like?” the waiter asked.

The couple jumped, realizing they hadn’t yet looked at the menu, “Uh, no, can we have another minute?” Hopper answered curtly.

“Certainly, sir. I will return to take your orders shortly.”

When the waiter returned, they put in their orders and then Hopper sat back in relief. He was glad to be done with most of the

formalities. Now he needed to prepare himself for what he had planned *after* dinner. That was what he was really nervous about. Watching Mac across the table as she glanced around the room, he couldn't believe he had gotten this far with her. That even after everything -- his less than ideal figure, his age, and more importantly El and all the secrets that came with her -- Mac had stuck around.

"Have I ever told you how glad I am that you ran into me that day at the library?" Hopper asked suddenly.

Mac's eyes locked on his, two pairs of burning blue flames in the dim room, "Yes, but you can tell me again."

Her tone soothed him and he leaned forward to be closer to her, "I never thought I would love anyone again. Not after Diane and Sara. But I took in El and things were going well. And then you turned up. You were so eager to take time out of your day to help me find a book. The hot, young thing that you are interested in me. A fat old man."

Mac's cheeks flushed, knowing the gravity behind his words if he spoke his deceased daughter's name aloud. "You're not that fat or old." she mumbled, smiling.

"Well either way, you changed my life. I thought I'd be fine raising El on my own, but you've made it a million times better." Hopper finished.

"Oh, Hop..." Mac cooed, holding back tears. "I worked so hard on my makeup tonight. You're gonna make me ruin it!"

Hopper laughed, "I love you, Mackenna. Always."

Mac stretched across the table to kiss Hopper, smiling into his lips. "I love you, too Jim."

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The cottage on the pond had many faults. The floorboards were somewhat creaky, some of the doors didn't always latch all the way, and the stairs down to the cellar could test even a sober man's balance. But the one thing Mac had to give it was that no matter

what, there was always hot water. When her coworkers and friends complained of freezing pipes and calling plumbers in the middle of the night, Mac couldn't sympathize. She knew that when she stepped into her shower, it would be gloriously hot and stay that way the whole time.

Mac enjoyed the little things. As long as she had a roof over her head, a hot shower, and the man she loved in her bed she was a happy woman. All the while, she was practical and appreciated a clean home and a solid to-do list. She stood in the shower, shampooing her hair and thinking about everything she needed to do that day. Eventually she turned off the water and pushed back the curtain. When she stepped out of the tub though, she had to reach out and grab the towel rod as the room spun suddenly. It was made of plastic and cracked almost instantly, sending Mac crashing to the floor.

She landed hard on her wrist, elbow, and hip, but managed to keep her head off the tiles. For a moment she sat there, arm stinging and in shock. She didn't think she felt so dizzy in the shower. But now that she was down there on the floor, her head did feel a little woozy. Carefully she stood up, using the vanity to help stabilize her. She gripped it hard as blood rushed to her head again, though she managed to stay on her feet this time. El started knocking on the bedroom door.

"Mac? What was that? Are you okay?" she called from the hallway.

After El had almost walked in on Mac and Hopper having an intimate moment, they had to make it a rule that she needed to knock before entering someone's bedroom. If she didn't receive the go ahead to come in, she had to stay in the hall. Only if she thought it was an absolute emergency was she to let herself in. Fortunately they had never really needed to enforce the rule, but El followed it nonetheless.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Just slipped on the rug." Mac called back.

"Okay..." El replied.

Mac lifted her arm, wincing when she saw the blood running down her arm. It appeared that when the towel rod broke, it slashed into

the side of her forearm leaving a line of shallow scratches. She made quick work bandaging herself up as she had injured herself in similar ways many times before. But it bothered her that this time wasn't just because of her clumsiness. Although she knew exactly why she fell, she wasn't prepared to admit it quite yet.

Once she was bandaged and dressed, Mac found El in the kitchen already elbow deep in a sinkful of grey, sudsy water. From what she could tell, El was just moving the dishes around under the water and not actually washing them. The girl looked over her shoulder, a suspicion in her eyes only an old soul could muster. It was as if she knew Mac had lied to her about slipping on the rug. Mac tried to ignore it.

"Are you washing those dishes or just teaching them how to swim?" Mac asked, moving to stand next to the sink.

"How do you wash dishes?"

"Well first of all, drain some of that water." Mac instructed. "You don't need so much. Maybe only half the sink."

El nodded, her arm moving as she searched for the drain plug, "Then what?"

"Then you take the sponge and you use it to clean all the food off. When there's no more food, you rinse the dish under the tap and put it here on this towel" Mac explained, laying out a clean dishcloth on the counter next to the sink.

"Okay..."

El got to work scrubbing and Mac dried and put the dishes away. It didn't take long for El to clean them all. She drained the rest of the water from the sink, then helped Mac putting them away. Mac could tell El was eying her bandaged arm, which stuck out slightly from the end of her rolled up shirtsleeves. She wanted to assure El that it was a minor injury, but she also didn't want to draw any more attention to it than what was absolutely necessary.

"What now?" El asked finally when all the dishes were neatly in their

cabinets.

Mac ran through the list she had made in her head, “Did you clean your room?”

El nodded, “Yes.”

“Water the plants?”

“Yes.”

“Do your homework?”

El hesitated, “Most of it.” she answered slowly.

“Well, go get it and meet me in my study. We’ll do our homework together.”

“But Hop said...”

Mac ground her teeth, “I know what he said. But it’s okay. Now go get your homework.”

El didn’t move until Mac gave her a pointed look. Then she rushed off to her bedroom to do as she was told. Mac still hadn’t gotten used to being a parental figure in El’s life. She didn’t exactly enjoy laying down the law, but she knew if she wanted to be with Hopper this was what she would need to do every once in a while. Fortunately El was a pretty well behaved child and the few times when she did push back were usually directed at Hopper.

Mac sighed and ran her fingers over the bandages on her arm. She was still so tired, but there was so much work to do. She wondered if Hopper was right, maybe she was overworking herself. But this is what she wanted, to finally get her PhD. Maybe this was just the price she’d have to pay to get it. She took another deep breath, then turned to head to her study.

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After dinner Hopper walked slowly down the street with Mac back to her car. He helped her get in then went around and climbed in

behind the wheel. When he pulled away from the curb he continued on straight for a while, well past where Mac thought he would need to turn to get back to her apartment. She also realized they were also going in the opposite direction of Hopper's cabin in the woods. Mac reached to brush her hand down the back of Hopper's head.

"Hop, where are we going? You missed the turn." she asked him.

Hopper shook his head and glanced at her with a small smile, "No, I didn't miss the turn. Just trust me, okay?"

Mac suddenly felt nervous, was he taking her somewhere to propose? She didn't know if she was ready for that level of commitment. They had been together for a year but Hopper had a child, and she was still adjusting to her new motherly role. With all the upcoming changes, selling the shop, preparing to start her PhD, she didn't know if she could handle a wedding on top of it all. She couldn't say yes to Hopper, but she loved him and couldn't bare to lose him either.

Hopper noticed the shift in Mac's expression. The concern that was making her brows knit together and her fingers fidget with her skirt. For a moment he considered turning around, saying it was all just a joke. He wished he could ask her what she was thinking. This was something he had planned for so long, he'd worked so hard for it. Hopper ducked his chin in determination and continued driving.

Finally Hopper steered the Beetle off the main road onto a gravel drive leading into the woods. It bumped along, creaking as he gently coaxed it around potholes. The sun was just beginning to set, the light streaking in long shafts between the trees. They were only a few miles outside of Hawkins proper, but it felt like a whole other world. With the windows rolled down, the only sounds were the rumble of the car's engine and the birds' evening conversations.

"Where are we?" Mac asked as a small cottage appeared in front of them.

Hopper parked the car, shut it off, and started to climb out, "Home."

"What do you mean 'home?' You don't live here." she asked when he came to help her out.

He was grinning from ear to ear, “I don’t yet. But we could...together.”

“Hop...what are you talking about?”

“Just come on...come inside.” he said, pushing down the sudden worry. This was not going well at all, he thought.

Taking her hand, Hopper led Mac gently towards the front door of the cottage. He pulled out his key ring and turned it over in his hands for a moment until he found the one he was looking for. Mac almost couldn’t believe it when the lock turned over and he pushed open the door. He let her go in ahead of him, his palm warm against the small of her back. She took small, tentative steps feeling somewhat like an intruder.

“Jim, who’s house is this?” Mac asked firmly.

Hopper slid his arm around her waist and pulled her into him, “It’s our house, Mac. I bought it for us.”

“What?”

Mac’s voice was so small, Hopper almost thought he blew it completely. So he turned, getting down on one knee so he could see her better and she took a startled step back, “Mac, wait! No no no! I’m not proposing!” he said quickly.

“You’re not?”

“No! Not yet at least, not until we’re both ready.”

“Oh...” Mac mumbled.

Hopper stood again, hoping it would bring her some ease, “Mackenna I want you to move in with me. I bought this house so that we could be a family. I thought...well honestly I thought you would like it better than the cabin.”

Mac took in his words as tears started to well in her eyes, “Jim...are you serious?”

“Yeah, Mac, this house is ours.”

Just when Hopper thought she was going to turn and run, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply. He laughed and kissed her back, wrapping her in his arms. Mac continued to weep but she started laughing, too. When Hopper finally loosened his grip on her, she reached up to wipe shyly at her damp cheeks. Hopper cupped her head in his palm, his fingers winding in her hair. His smile was bigger than she'd ever seen it.

“There’s a big deck out back that looks over the pond. It’s beautiful.” he said. “And there’s a spot I think you’ll love. To have all your plants and stuff. Do your work.”

She chuckled, gasping a little between her sobs, “Okay, show me.”

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Mac’s study was actually the little sunporch that jutted out off the side of the house. As one would expect, it was filled with plants. Some hanging in pots from the ceiling, some spilling over the edges of the shelves that lined the walls. It always smelled of the earth, sweet and rich. In the springtime, some of her plants would bloom and the room would remind her of the florist shop. The shelves held many books as well, mostly informational tomes on plant biology and botany.

This was also where Mac kept some of her most prized possessions. A copy of *The Great Gatsby* her grandmother gave her when she was young. The little terracotta pot that once held the first plant -- a beautiful African violet -- her grandfather gave her. A bundle of wild flowers El gave her the day they met that were dried and framed. A birthday card from Hopper including the words “I love you, always” inside, one of the first times he ever told her. The only remaining photo she had of her deceased parents.

She went to her desk and straightened up some of the papers there. To her left was Mac’s workbench, which at that time was splattered with soil, a couple plant starter trays, and a number of different seed packets. Some empty petri dishes were stacked precariously in one corner along with other scientific equipment. To her right in the

other corner of the room, a large well-worn leather armchair sat stoutly, the throw blanket crumpled in the seat. The end table next to it that was almost always obscured by books also held a neglected mug of coffee from the evening before.

Mac preferred to work on her feet most times since she was always moving around. But for grading homework she had a rolling padded stool to sit on. She pulled it out and got settled, glancing out the windows in front of her at the pond. The loon from that morning was diving into shallow water near their little dock. Behind her she could hear El rustling around in the kitchen. A short while later, the girl appeared at Mac's elbow. Books and papers bundled in her arms, El carefully floated a steaming mug through the air, landing on Mac's desk.

"Tea." El explained.

Mac smiled, "Thank you, sweetheart. Smells great."

El dumped her books in the armchair, then took the old coffee mug to put in the sink. When she returned, she had her own steaming mug. Mac watched the girl as she cupped it in her hands, closing her eyes to breathe it in. Sometimes El surprised her with the things she picked up on. She was sure El had seen her doing that with her own drink once and was just parroting the action. If Mac was honest, she thought it was kind of cute and endearing. She just hoped she wouldn't give the girl any bad habits.

"Music?" El asked.

"Sure, you pick." Mac replied, already focusing in.

El picked a jazz radio station out of the city. She left the volume low, knowing Mac didn't like working with it too loud. Then she cozied up in the chair with her own homework. Occasionally she would ask Mac questions or bring over a worksheet to show her. But mostly the two girls worked in silence. Because of this, Mac didn't even notice when El finished her homework and left the study to go watch TV.

Mac also didn't hear when Hopper came home. From the front door, it was hard to see if anyone was in the study. Hopper unbuckled and

removed his holster, storing it safely away in the small cabinet by the door. As soon as he stepped up behind El on the couch though, he noticed Mac hunched over her desk. He put a hand on El's shoulder and she twisted to look up at him. Her expression was apologetic and Hopper understood what it meant.

"How long did she sleep?" he asked El softly.

"Until nine-four...9:45." she replied.

Hopper sighed, "What did you guys do?"

"She took a shower and fell. Then we did the dishes. Then we did homework."

"She fell? What does that mean?"

"She said she tripped on the rug. Her arm has...white cloth." El said, struggling for the word 'bandage.'

"Shit..." Hopper mumbled under his breath. When he saw El's distressed expression, he tried to give her a reassuring smile, "It's alright. It'll be okay."

"Okay..."

Hopper gave her shoulder a rough pat, "Run off to your room, kid. Okay? Mac and I need to have a talk."

El nodded and unfolded from the couch. As she left the room, the TV switched off on its own. Hopper waited to hear her door shut, his eyes glued on the back of Mac's head. When he was sure El was gone, he sighed and headed for the study.

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"Where do I put this?" El asked, holding up a small, boxy radio.

Mac glanced over her shoulder from where she was putting dishes into the empty cabinets, "You can put that out in the study." she answered.

El moved to put the radio on top of the many boxes that were stacked in the sunporch. The moving company had brought over their boxes that morning and they had been working to empty them since. Across the room, Hopper caught Mac's eye and grinned at her. He was busy taking his record collection out of their boxes and putting them on shelves. When El returned from the porch, she sat down on the floor next to him to help. Mac smiled back at them, a warm feeling washing over her at how adorable they looked together.

"Pink...F...F...Flo..." El said, sounding it out.

"Pink Floyd. Hey, that's a great album." Hopper said, glancing at the record she was holding.

"Pink Floyd." El parroted.

"Did I not play that one for you?"

El shook her head, "No."

"Well put it on then. We could use some tunes."

El stood and went to the record player. She gingerly pulled the vinyl album out of its sleeve and placed it on the player. She lifted the pin and lowered it gently onto the record. At first it didn't sound like anything was playing until the low heartbeat started to grow louder. When the sounds of what could've been an accounting office kicked in, El tilted her head in curiosity. Eventually the drumbeat of "Breathe" finally entered and Hopper started to bob his head.

"Now this is music." he said.

El moved her head a little too, watching what Hopper was doing. "Good." she said, smiling.

As records ended, Hopper would find another that El hadn't yet heard and have her put that one on next. Mac would occasionally chime in with suggestions. But mostly she just wanted to watch Hopper interacting with his adopted daughter. She had spent countless hours with the two of them, though now that they were moving in together it felt a little different. Hopper was right; they could be a real family in that cottage.

“Hot Tuna?” El asked, pulling an album off the shelf and holding it up to show Hopper and Mac.

Hopper was up a ladder next to the dining room table, putting up a hanging chain lamp that Mac’s grandmother had given her. The lampshade was a stained glass pattern of purple irises. Mac stood underneath, ready to catch the lamp if it fell. Outside the sun had gone down and their dinner was cooking in the oven. Hopper glanced under his raised arm to look at El and Mac flinched as the lamp swung suddenly.

“Oh yeah, *Burgers*? That’s a good one.” he answered.

“Hot Tuna Burgers?” El mumbled to herself.

Mac chuckled, “The sixties were a weird time, kid.”

El nodded and put the record on, “Yes, very weird.”

“Hey kid, can you come help me out here?” Hopper asked and El moved to stand on the other side of the ladder from Mac. She looked up at him, squinting in the light, “Mac, where do you want it?”

The chain clearly gained slack as El used her powers to levitate the lamp, “A little higher, El...a little more...yeah, okay that’s good.” Mac said.

Hopper pulled the chain tight and slipped one link over the hook he screwed into the ceiling, “Alright, El, go ahead and let go. Slowly though.”

As El released the lamp, it swung a little bit then settled over the table, “Perfect.” Mac said with a nod of her head.

And it was perfect; their new little life in the cottage.

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“Hey, I thought I told you to get some rest?” Hopper said, reaching to smooth his hand over Mac’s hair.

She barely looked up from her work when she replied, “I did for a

couple hours.”

Hopper sighed and looked away for a moment, trying to summon his patience, “What happened to your arm, Mac?”

“I tripped getting out of the shower.” she said, tugging her sleeve down over the bandages. “It’s barely a scratch.”

“How long are you gonna keep bullshitting me?”

His stern tone finally got her attention, “What are you talking about, Hop?” she asked, turning to face him.

“Mackenna, really? Are you serious?” he snapped. “You can lie to El if you want. But don’t fucking lie to me.”

“I’m not lying to you! I’m fine, everything’s fine!”

Hopper growled, running a hand over his face exasperatedly, “You’re not though! Have you looked at yourself lately? You’re pale, you’re practically skin and bone. And now this with your arm! You didn’t trip, Mac. Did you?”

Mac glared back at him, “You’re an asshole, Jim.” she replied through gritted teeth.

“Oh, I’m an asshole? That’s fucking rich!” Hopper laughed angrily.

“I have a lot of work to do.” she continued, rolling her eyes as she turned back to her desk. “So if you’re done calling me ugly, I’d appreciate it if you’d leave me alone.”

“Argh! You insufferable woman!” Hopper roared, making Mac jump. She looked at him again, “I’m not calling you ugly, Mackenna! I’m saying you’re killing yourself. I can’t watch you do this to yourself anymore!”

“I’m not...I’m f--” she started, but Hopper cut her off.

“No! Don’t you dare! If you tell me you’re fine one more time...I swear, Mac.” he threatened, glaring at her.

“Hopper...” Mac mumbled, her whole body trembling.

Hopper hesitated, realizing he had really frightened her. He moved to kneel in front of her, putting his hands on either side of her face. “You tell me that this is what you want. But you can’t honestly tell me that working yourself into the dirt is what you want.”

“This is how I get my degree. A PhD is a lot of work.”

“Then maybe you need to give up teaching. Maybe both things are too much.”

Mac tried to shake her head, “No, I can’t do that. I want to teach. I’ve always wanted to teach.”

“I think you need to choose, Mac. I think it has to be one or the other.”

“It doesn’t though. It’s just because the semester is almost over, that’s all.”

Hopper sighed and leaned his head into her chest, dropping his hands to her elbows, “Mackenna, please...you know what’s happening. You’re smart...so smart. You know better than this.” he said quietly.

Mac couldn’t stop her body from shaking, “Jim I can’t...I can’t just give up.”

“You wouldn’t be giving up though.” he said, looking up at her again. “If you quit the teaching, you could focus on your degree and then start again when it’s done.”

“This is everything I’ve ever wanted. *Everything* . If I stop teaching, what if I never get a chance to go back?”

“There’ll always be opportunities, Mac. Maybe not here in Hawkins. But if we have to move somewhere to follow your dream, you know El and I would do that in a heartbeat.”

“We have bills to pay and my degree isn’t free.”

Hopper shook his head, “We’ll figure out the money.”

“Hopper...”

“I just want you to be healthy. I can’t watch another person I love...” he said, turning his face away as images of his daughter Sara in her hospital bed flashed through his mind. His eyes lingered on the braided, blue band around his wrist, “I can’t watch you die, Mac. I just can’t.”

Mac kissed Hopper’s forehead, “Let me finish this semester, Jim. Let me finish this semester and then I promise I’ll quit the high school.”

Hopper looked into her eyes, seeing that she had her own tears leaving wet streaks down her face, “This last semester, and you give them your notice first thing on Monday.”

“First thing.” Mac nodded solemnly.

“Okay...”

A small part of Mac’s heart broke agreeing to Hopper’s compromise. She could almost feel it drifting away from her. But the sheer panic in Hopper’s eyes when he spoke about losing her...she couldn’t do that to him. She knew deep down he was right, she was killing herself. Her fall getting out of the shower was only the beginning. If she kept going at the rate she was, fainting spells would be the least of her worries. She was physically unable to handle the teaching position and the workload of her PhD simultaneously. It was time she made a choice, one or the other.

“I’m sorry I yelled.” Hopper mumbled finally, reaching to wipe her tears with his fingers.

“I’m sorry I lied.” she replied. She ducked her head, “You were right, I didn’t trip. I got a bit lightheaded and tried to catch my fall. I broke the towel rod.”

Hopper looked at her arm, “Are you sure you’re okay? Maybe we should get you checked out.”

“I’ll make an appointment with my GP this week. But I’m sure they’ll just tell me I need to sleep and eat a good meal.”

“Well, I can’t sleep for you.” Hopper joked. “But I can certainly try to cook you a good meal.”

“That’s sounds nice.”

“How much more work do you have to do?”

Mac glanced at her messy desk, strewn with worksheets and essays, pens and pencils. Her typewriter was even perched on an inch deep stack of papers, “I can work on it tomorrow. For now, I think I’d like to go out in the canoe.”

Hopper’s face brightened, “That sounds relaxing.”

“Well you go get it ready and I’ll have El help me make us a little picnic lunch.”

“Can do, hun.” Hopper said, standing. He went to the door on the sunporch that led to the backyard and then paused, “I love you, Mackenna. Always.”

“I love you, too Jim. More than you know.”

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El and Mac made their way down the dock with a bunch of cucumber and chicken salad sandwiches wrapped in a dish towel and a full thermos of hot tea. They watched as Hopper nudged the canoe off the muddy shore and into the pond with an oar. It’s forest green paint was chipping where it met with the metal edge and it was clear the white interior paint had seen better days. Hopper had brought out a big heap of wool blankets, which were piled on the end of the dock.

“Alright, pass me the blankets first.” he said, tossing the guide rope up to Mac so she could keep the canoe steady.

El put the thermos down and started handing over blankets one by one.. Hopper did his best to make kind of a nest in the bottom of the canoe. “What next?” El asked when she passed over the last blanket.

“You get in, then Mac can pass us the lunch.” Hopper held out his hand and El took it, looking like she was about to leap into the boat.

“Just step in gently.”

El nodded and gingerly stretched one foot into the canoe. She wobbled for a moment, then righted herself, smiling broadly. Hopper helped her sit down in the front of the canoe and then came back for Mac. She passed him the sandwiches and the thermos first, which he set into the little wooden crate at the back. Then he held out his hand again for Mac.

“Thank you, Chief.” she said sweetly, carefully stepping down into the canoe.

“You’re very welcome.”

Hopper sat down on the little shelf bench towards the back of the canoe and Mac got settled between him and El. She made sure El was tucked into a blanket while Hopper paddled them out towards the middle of the pond. When he decided they had gone far enough, he stored the oar away in the back and then settled down behind Mac. He pulled her in between his legs and she leaned back against his chest, pulling another blanket up over her lap. She closed her eyes for a moment, soaking in the warm sun on her face.

“Now this is the life.” Hopper said, the sound rumbling against the back of Mac’s head.

He leaned to kiss Mac’s temple and she scrunched up her face when his beard tickled her cheek. She opened her eyes and saw El at the opposite end of the canoe, watching them with a wistful smile on her face. Her lovely chestnut curls ruffled in the breeze and her cheeks were flushed from the slightly chilly air. El held Mac’s gaze for a moment and then looked away, out to the world around her. Hopper wrapped his arms tighter around Mac and she snuggled in.

They certainly could get used to this.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sneaky 80s reference answer: "Mr. Krelborn" who takes over Mac's flower shop, is a reference to the 1986 comedy/horror musical "Little Shop of

Horrors," who's main character, Seymour Krelborn works in a NYC flower shop.